

WASHINGTON, DC—Congressman Peter DeFazio (D-Ore.) is pleased to announce today that a one-year reauthorization of the vital county payments program has been included in the Agriculture Disaster Assistance and Western States Emergency Supplemental spending bill.

The bill was approved by an overwhelming vote of 302-120.

“For the second time in three weeks, the House has demonstrated its determination to provide emergency assistance to rural communities by continuing the Secure Rural Schools Act, this time by separating this critical funding from the continuing controversy around the Iraq war funding,” DeFazio said.

The House approved a one-year extension of the Secure Rural Schools program in the Emergency Supplement funding bill for Iraq war a few weeks ago. The President vetoed that bill primarily due to concerns about conditions placed on the Iraq war funding.

In response, the House leadership decided to put the county payments funding - along with assistance for agriculture, coastal Oregon and California salmon fishermen and fishing communities hurt by the virtual shut-down of last year's fishing season, and wildfire suppression - in a separate emergency supplemental funding bill and separate it from the ongoing controversy surrounding funding for the Iraq war.

Unfortunately, earlier today, the White House announced that the President intends to veto the Agriculture Disaster Assistance and Western States Emergency Supplemental spending bill because expiration of county payments “does not meet any reasonable definition of emergency.”

“President Bush lives a sheltered life. He travels around the world in a jumbo jet and is surrounded by secret service day and night at taxpayer expense.

For him to say to the tens of thousands of Oregonians and others who have, or on the verge of, losing jobs, and vital services like law enforcement and health care as well as educational opportunities for their children, that's not an emergency, shows how out of touch he is with the needs of average citizens,” DeFazio said.

“The Secure Rural Schools Act expired on President Bush's watch with a Republican

controlled Congress.

Despite his veto threats, the Democrats are attempting to ensure that rural communities don't have to undergo devastating cuts in services in July."

Last year, the county payments program provided nearly \$280 million to 33 Oregon counties for services like schools, roads and law enforcement. Counties receiving funding under the program have a high proportion of federally owned lands. Prior to the enactment of the county payments program, they had received a percentage of receipts from timber harvests, which fluctuated from year to year. However, harvest levels decreased precipitously in the late 1990s due to changes in federal forest policy. In 2000, Congress passed the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act to help stabilize these payments and ensure proper funding for vital county services.

The President also threatened to veto the bill because of the aid for Oregon and California salmon fishermen and fishing communities. He called the aid "unwarranted."

"Many fishing families and their local communities have been financially devastated by last year's virtual closure of the coastal salmon fishing season. The President's administration declared a disaster, but now he refuses to support the actual dollars needed to aid these individuals. These families and communities cannot put food on the table and pay bills with the President's rhetoric.

They need actual dollars.

It is unconscionable that the President would threaten to veto financial aid for salmon fishermen and their local communities for a disaster that he long ago acknowledged," said DeFazio.